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ABSTRACT

When one educator was teaching English in middle and high school, she wondered why so many adolescents disliked reading. Even teen-aged protagonists and up-to-the-minute topics were not guaranteed to be "interesting." Yet something engages these young readers, at times and in some texts. To begin to get some answers, she interviewed adolescents about reading, asking what worked for them and what did not. She talked with them about whatever they brought up in association with reading, which included their career plans, their families, their hobbies, their friends, and much more. She wanted to see how reading fit--or did not fit--into their lives, and why. One thing the educator learned in these interviews was this: readers themselves rarely understand the fundamental reasons that they either connect with a text or find it useless. This paper puts two of the adolescent readers she interviewed and the texts they read or refuse to read under the microscope so that other educators can begin to discover their particular patterns of reading and resistance. (NKA)

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Reading This and Refusing That: Case Studies of High School Students' Patterns of Reading and Resistance

When I was teaching English in middle and high school, I kept wondering why so many adolescents disliked reading. The students seemed satisfied with saying, "The book was boring," or "I just didn't like it." Even teen-aged protagonists and up-to-the-minute topics were not guaranteed to be "interesting." Yet something engages these young readers, at some times and in some texts. Something underlies a teenager's judgment that one text is worth reading while another is boring. What is it?

To begin to get at some answers to this question, I interviewed adolescents about reading, asking what worked for them and what didn't. I talked with them about whatever they brought up in association with reading, which included their career plans, their families, their hobbies, their friends, and much more. I wanted to see how reading fit--or did not fit--into their lives, and why.

One thing I learned in these interviews is this: readers themselves rarely understand the fundamental reasons that they either connect with a text or find it useless. A reader may say that he liked a book because it was about a subject that interested him, like football or vampires. But connecting with a text goes deeper than what the book appears to be about; even avid readers have had the experience of being disappointed by a text on an interesting topic. When adolescents talked about what they liked to read and what they didn't, they would begin by talking about subjects, but when asked if they would read and enjoy any and every text on their chosen subject, they would see that this was too broad a promise to make. Ultimately they would just say, "I'll read it if it's interesting. If it's boring, I'll skip it."

Talking about "interesting" and "boring" without understanding what underlies those terms doesn't help us understand why these readers engage with one text but

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not another. So we need to interpret individual reading histories by putting together pieces of a puzzle which readers themselves have not assembled. What I found, after much analysis, is that when a text serves the student's purposes, it is perceived as interesting. I will describe these purposes in greater detail later, but for now let me say that these purposes may be largely unconscious. They may not be connected with reading in the student's mind. But when a book satisfies these purposes the reader feels that the book is interesting and worth the time it takes to read. When a text does not serve the reader's purposes, it is perceived as boring. When it takes the reader into territory which is psychologically threatening, it may be perceived, also, as boring, or it may be seen as a really bad book.

And now I will put two of the adolescent readers I interviewed and the texts they read or refuse to read under the microscope so that we can begin to discover their particular patterns of reading and resistance:

Joel is now sixteen years old. When he was in elementary school, he was an excellent reader. He says, "I remember that my first-grade teacher put me and a girl into a reading group by ourselves because we were so far ahead of the other kids." But when Joel got to middle school and joined the wrestling and tennis teams, he more or less stopped reading because most of his free time was taken up by the sports and social activities. He basically stopped learning to read in seventh grade. Now that he's a junior in high school, he's feeling the effects of this. He says he can't understand what he reads any more, and he can't understand why reading has become so hard.

There are at least two parts to Joel's story of not-reading. One part is about the technical difficulties with reading which come from his lack of reading practice. These are things like limited vocabulary, inexperience with complicated syntax, inadequate background knowledge, and confusion in the face of varied literary techniques, such as flashbacks and shifts in points of view. But these technical difficulties will begin to dissolve if Joel begins reading again with full engagement, so the question becomes how to get him reading again. To do this, we need to examine another part of his story, the part that has to do with valuing reading. This means analyzing the texts that he enjoys and the ways he connects with them, and contrasting those with the ones he resists.

In our interviews, Joel talked about two assigned books he liked and two he didn't like. First we'll look at the two he liked, <u>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</u>, and <u>Othello</u>. He said:

I liked that book
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.
That was pretty funny.

It was funny, it was interesting.
Ken Kesey who wrote the book just made it interesting,
He would do different stuff in there,
Kinda based it on real life, in the asylum,
But kinda just mixed it up,
So it was pretty funny.

From these initial remarks, we might conclude that Joel is simply looking to be amused by the author's "mixing up" real life creatively with "different stuff." This is a start, but far from a finished answer to why Joel engaged with this book. Let's keep going.

Othello was another text Joel enjoyed. One reason was that he didn't have to read it himself because the teacher used audiotapes of actors reading the play. But not having to depend on himself to read it is only the beginning. There has to be a way for Joel to connect and engage with the story and the characters, and here is what he said that offers some clues:

Othello was pretty interesting,
Like Iago, the way Shakespeare made Iago plan everything
How nothing messed up,
Everything went perfect
The way he had it planned...
And the way he characterized everybody was interesting.

Iago's almost-perfect plan was the only content matter in Othello that Joel mentioned. He admired it and used it as the basis for the paper that he wrote in response to the play. He was not concerned with Iago's role as an embodiment of evil; he was focused on Iago's scheme to bring down a great man, and he was fascinated with how close Iago came to getting away with it. We can see that Joel's purposes, whatever they are, were served by the character of Iago, and through this character he felt connected to the play. Whatever Joel was searching for, he found at least some of it in Iago. If we contrast Othello and Cuckoo's Nest with the two books that Joel did not like, we can begin to discern Joel's pattern of engagement with text.

When I asked Joel about the books that he didn't enjoy, he found it difficult to explain why he didn't like them. One was a book he tried to read outside of class:

> We had to pick a book to read on our own.
> I picked Cujo by Stephen King
> 'cause I heard he's real good,
> so I picked something, not too long
> because it's for the class
> but I'm not understanding it.
> Not at all...
> Stephen King makes it so confusing
>
> I mean at first I wasn't understanding anything,
> And then it kind of got into something else,
> It kinda switched pace,
> And then I just keep reading,
> Trying to figure out what's going on.
> I'm not used to reading big books like this.

Joel is uncomfortable with King's novelistic technique of introducing multiple characters and locations before getting on with the action. Joel cannot see what they are doing in the story until they engage in action, and he is not experienced in holding information suspended in mid-air while he (or the author) builds enough of the story for the information to rest upon. These are some of his technical reading difficulties. But he isn't being rewarded for his reading efforts in the way he had hoped: the illustration on the cover of the book shows an insane-looking drooling monster-dog and implies a certain kind of action that Joel was eagerly anticipating but which he never found because he did not--could not--finish reading this book. What remains with him from his attempts to read it is a sense of confusion, of not knowing what was going on, and frustration that the good parts that he had heard about were so slow in coming that he gave up on them altogether. He didn't want to read a novel which turned out to be focused on a young family, a marriage, and an unwieldy collection of characters he couldn't keep straight. He wanted to see combat between a monster and a hero, and it never happened.

Another book that Joel did not read much of and did not connect with is Catcher in the Rye:

> Catcher in the Rye, I didn't like that too much,
> It's just kinda boring.

I don't know, it just kinda...
'cause the guy, he's like, I don't know,
he kind runs away from home for a few days,
and it's just like he's criticizing everything, it's just...
I wasn't interested in it.
It was just---I mean, goin' through all this weird stuff...

I asked Joel if he disliked the character of Holden Caufield, and he said that Holden was OK, but that the way the author wrote the book just didn't make sense:

I just didn't like the way he made Holden go through stuff,
Like how he went through--
He got involved with those problems,
And it just wasn't...
I just didn't like the way the story turned out,
Or the way the story was goin'.

We see here Joel's on-going struggle to identify and articulate his problems with what he reads. I asked where the story could have gone that might have made it more interesting or satisfying. Joel said that "It started out bad...he got frustrated at school and then he just took off on his own..."

An apparent contradiction in Joel's responses to texts shows up here: Joel enjoys the craziness and mixed-up people and events in Cuckoo's Nest, but is put off by "weird stuff" and the protagonist's getting "involved with problems" in Catcher. I remarked that Cuckoo's Nest had crazy people doing crazy things, and asked if they annoyed him, but he said No. Then he expounded on Cuckoo's Nest:

It's kind funny 'cause I mean, overall,
Everybody in the ward could actually leave if they wanted to,
'cause they weren't, they didn't have to stay there,
it was their decision,
and then McMurphy's thinkin',
Why you stayin'?
He was pretty cool
Just his attitude,
The way he acted.
I mean, he stood up for himself and everybody else.

I probed into McMurphy's attitude, asking Joel if he saw McMurphy taking on authority, holding up my fists to indicate aggression. Joel's face lit up and he said "Yeah!" but when I asked him if Holden took on authority that way, Joel's voice and expression flattened out and he said No. I was getting close to the reasons Joel liked McMurphy but disliked Holden:

> Interviewer: Okay, so you liked watching McMurphy--
> Joel: [confidently] Yeah.
> Interviewer: --kinda engage in that.
> Joel: [happily] Yeah.

Joel is demonstrating here a satisfying connection between the writer's vision of the world and his characters in it, and the reader's vision of the world and the kinds of people he likes to get to know. Joel thoroughly enjoys McMurphy's courage in engaging in combat with authority, and he also appreciates McMurphy's concern for the welfare of the other patients. Holden Caufield, however, does not provide Joel with the model of courage and agency that he seeks. On the contrary, Holden seems to complain, to wander, to go through a series of problems he cannot solve, to seek what he cannot find, and apparently to spend the whole novel running away from authority rather than taking it on. This is deeply unsatisfying to Joel.

The two characters that Joel admired and felt interested in, Iago and McMurphy, are both active rebels, undermining authority. Both declare war on the authorities immediately over them. Both make daring, high-stakes plans which they carry out in spite of the risks. Both make their plans work long enough to inflict damage on their enemies. In the end, both die, but this only adds to Joel's feeling that these characters and their stories are truly important. In contrast, the battles that Holden fights are against an amorphous enemy (the phoniness of society and the inevitability of loss of innocence). Perhaps most important, Holden fights in a confused, adolescent way rather than developing strategic battle plans as McMurphy and Iago do. Joel appreciates the direct, military approach, and the characters he connects with are skilled in strategic combat. No adolescent angst for them.

Joel is seeking a certain kind of hero engaging successfully in a certain kind of combat. He was truly puzzled about why anyone would write a book about a character as weak and "boring" as Holden, and why a teacher would assign such a book to the whole class to read and write about. Nothing about Catcher in the Rye made sense to him. If we know what Joel is looking for in a text (even when he cannot articulate or even see clearly what he wants), we can help him find texts

that satisfy, texts that show him what reading can do for him, and, in the process, improve his technical reading skills. Without such help, Joel is likely to leave high school reading at a seventh-grade level and believing that reading is generally a waste of time.

The second student I want to tell you about has what appears to be a very different reading story, but we will see some important similarities with Joel's story finally emerging. Valisha is an eighteen-year-old senior whose earliest memories of reading are painful. In first and second grade she hated reading aloud in front of other kids, because, she said, she hated listening to herself "mess up." But Valisha is now, in late adolescence, finding books that she enjoys. By her own count, her total lifetime reading consists of two non-fiction books which she read for school reports (one on Martin Luther King in eighth grade and one on abortion in high school), and four fiction books, all of which she read during the last year. Three of these are novels by Terry McMillan, and the other one is a mystery story assigned in Valisha's English class.

Valisha's teachers consider her to be a student who struggles in an general way with school work. They describe her as struggling to understand concepts and even to read and write on a basic level. Most of what she is assigned to read she does not read because she says she does not understand it or because it is boring. However, if we examine carefully the texts she does connect with we can see that she reads with quite a lot of insight when a text serves her reading purposes.

The first piece of fiction Valisha read from start to finish was Terry McMillan's Waiting to Exhale. Valisha had seen the movie, so when she saw the book at a friend's house, she tried reading it. It took her a month or two to get through it all, but she stuck with it. She thought the book was better than the movie, because there was more in it. She admired the protagonist and the way the author presented her:

> [I liked] how she just speak her mind,
> say anything, and you know, tell how--
> that's how I like it, just tell it
> 'stead of beatin' around the bush with it.
> If you're gonna say it, say it. [Snaps fingers for emphasis.]
> [I liked] the people--the charactership--
> She just put it more clearly, you know,
> Like, how things should be with you and your man.

Valisha likes straightforward information presented through characters she admires, and the information she is seeking in this story is "how things should be between you and your man." It helps to know that Valisha is the mother of a year-old baby, not married but working out a relationship with the baby's father. Her own father left her family when she was very young, so she is leery of becoming dependent on a man who might mistreat her or abandon her. She wants a good relationship with a man, but she also wants to be able to take care of herself and her child. McMillan's protagonists are searching for the same combination of loving relationship and self-reliance, and Valisha deeply appreciates the role models they provide.

When Valisha read another McMillan book, Mama, she found another role model she could learn from:

> I enjoyed Mama
> 'Cause it tells the truth in life,
> and it's like an adult book,
> and I like books like that.
>
> I liked Mildred, but I didn't like her ways.
> She was, um, what's the word, she was very…
> [exhales in exasperation as she searches for the word]
> she was a very outgoing woman to men [laughs a little].
> I liked her five kids,
> But Crook, I didn't like Crook [Mildred's husband].
> He was abusive,
> He tried to make her mind him,
> Like he was her daddy
> And she had to play a role as a child with him
> Instead of a grown-up.
> And he beat her, and he was very jealous.
> But he cheated on her several times.
> I didn't like that.
> After a while, she just got fed up with it,
> And plus she found out he was still cheating with this woman,
> So she told him she wanted a divorce,
> And he moved out
> And they got a divorce.
>
> With Mama--I don't know--

It's like telling me another person's life,
Another person perspective.
Like, since I'm growin' up, you know?
About to be in the real world, how things will prob'ly be.

With the men and stuff, I don't believe like that,
With all those men.
And they drunk a lot, too.
They drunk like every day,
And Freda got on drugs from her boyfriend...

I think Mildred was a really, really good mom.
She never let anything come between her and her kids,
And even though the men that she was with,
And maybe she moved a man in her house or some'n,
But she never let them just take control of her house,
She always had control of her house,
And what went on with her kids.

Valisha shows us here that she is quite capable of sorting out the strengths and weaknesses of Mildred's character--she does not make the mistake that many immature readers make of putting characters into the category of pure hero or villain. She develops a more complex understanding of what she admires and what she does not. She also shows insight into the ways that Mildred's husband infantilizes her.

Valisha's reactions to books she did not enjoy give us more information about how she connects with some books and why she resists others. Go Ask Alice is popular with many teenagers, but Valisha did not like it at all. When I probed into her reasons, she said she didn't like how that book ended with Alice's unexpected death from a drug overdose after she had presumably turned her life around. I asked Valisha what she was thinking when she was reading Alice's story. She said:

I was thinking
Another young person tryin' to find herself in life.
That's how she was doin' it, but...

She let drugs run her life,
And she let sex run her life,

And friends,
And men.
I don't think--
You should be a bigger person,
Not to let stuff like that run your life,
Should have control over your own life.

I like the Terry McMillan book 'cause it's more adult--
And I like adult books, stuff like that,
That tells the truth,
Tells everything,
Tells how life is really,
And no secrets, and stuff like that, you know?

Valisha reveals two qualities of her own character which created a mis-match between herself and the book. The first is her perception of herself as a more mature person who does not need to learn about fifteen-year-olds coming to a bad end because they use drugs. The second is very important for teachers who want to help Valisha find rewarding texts to read: Valisha is seeking models of independence, characters who do not let other people or drugs or anything else take control of their lives. Valisha is looking to her future, not to her past as a fifteen-year-old. She wants to read about people who succeed in their struggle with forces which threaten to overtake them. Alice appeared to be succeeding, but suddenly, with no explanation, she was dead. Valisha was disturbed by this. This story did not help her learn what she wants and needs to learn about how to meet life's challenges.

She was also disturbed by the other serious book read in that class, Kindred, by Octavia Butler. She said:

I don't like the last book, Kindred.
That book is really really boring

I don't enjoy reading som'n like what happened
Back in the day when slavery,
How black people was treated.
I don't like that.

Dana--she, like
Another person, somebody else is running her life,

And he got control over her life right now,
And you know how she keep switching back in the times
And I don't like that.
'Cause a little boy is running her life again,
and it's just not possible to go back in time like that,
at least I hope it ain't,
you know, she has little dizzy things that she come back,
and like it is real when she come back all hurt and stuff...
I don't like that.
Like you in one place one minute
And then you in the next place one minute,
And you hurt,
And you're sleeping--I don't like that.

Valisha begins her assessment of Kindred with "boring," but when she analyzes her own feelings, she realizes that what she resists is being forced back in time to witness the brutality of slavery. Because she is emotionally engaged with her reading, the experience is extremely painful, and she shuts it out with the first weapon that comes to mind: "boring." This word puts the story in a category of "inferior, not worth reading," at the same time that it protects the reader's feelings by allowing her to say, "I'm not hurting here, I'm just bored." But what is really causing Valisha distress in trying to read Kindred is the brutality of slave life and the sensation of identifying with a character who is unable to control what is happening to her. Dana is sent back in time to the early nineteenth century and across the country from California to the antebellum South. Just as Alice was unable to control her slide into drug abuse, so Dana is unable to control her location in time and place. She is transported whenever the nineteenth-century slave-owner's son needs her help--he is able to call her to him in some mysterious way neither of them understands. The situation is too threatening for Valisha to enjoy as a story.

But McMillan's books contain violence, too, and I asked Valisha why she would quit reading Kindred but keep going through a violent scene in Mama, in which Mildred's abusive husband beat her. Valisha said:

You keep readin' on,
She did get a divorce from him.
Kindred, they had to keep goin' back and back
And takin' the abuse.

Through Valisha's eyes, we see the satisfying way that Mildred takes control of her situation by divorcing the husband who beats and betrays her. Dana, the protagonist in Kindred, is not in charge of her life in the same sense that Mildred is in charge of hers because the journey that Kindred chronicles is larger than an individual's life. Dana's personal story has become entangled with the history of her ancestors and of the nation, and because Valisha does not know this tradition, it is not as satisfying to her as the more realistic McMillan stories with their reassuring correspondences to ordinary life. You know where you are in McMillan's world, and in that world Valisha can find strong female protagonists who do not let men or anyone else control their lives, but who also learn how to enjoy satisfying romantic relationships. These women, and the straight-forward way McMillan talks about them, provide models for Valisha as she looks to her future and builds her identity as a woman.

As English teachers, we need to consider that many of our students do not love to read just for the sake of reading. They tend to be highly selective, even though they cannot always explain why they do or do not connect with a particular text. If we listen carefully to what they have to say about why they appreciate a character or a situation, and help them probe beneath the surface of "interesting" and "boring," we will probably find that they are searching for ways to be successful men and women in the culture they are living in. Even texts that amuse or entertain are providing meaningful world-views and satisfying characters and events for their readers that can give teachers insight into what these readers are looking for. We need to encourage students to talk frankly about their reading so we can listen carefully for evidence of their purposes for reading. If they and we are clearer about these deeper purposes and the kinds of satisfactions that are possible through reading, we can reduce resistance and promote engagement.

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